

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF DELAWARE

|                       |   |                      |
|-----------------------|---|----------------------|
| GEORGE CURTIS,        | : |                      |
|                       | : |                      |
| Plaintiff,            | : |                      |
|                       | : |                      |
|                       | : |                      |
| v.                    | : | Civ. No. 18-1499-CFC |
|                       | : |                      |
| DAVID PIERCE, et al., | : |                      |
|                       | : |                      |
| Defendants.           | : |                      |
|                       | : |                      |

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George Curtis, Howard R. Young Correctional Institution, Wilmington, Delaware, Pro Se Plaintiff.

**MEMORANDUM OPINION**

May 14, 2019  
Wilmington, Delaware

  
CONNOLLY, U.S. District Judge:

## I. INTRODUCTION

Plaintiff George Curtis ("Plaintiff"), a former inmate at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center ("VCC") in Smyrna, Delaware, now housed at the Howard R. Young Correctional Institution ("HRYCI") in Wilmington, Delaware filed this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983.<sup>1</sup> (D.I. 3) He appears *pro se* and has been granted leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (D.I. 5) The Court proceeds to review and screen the matter pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b) and § 1915A(a).

## II. BACKGROUND

On October 29, 2016, Plaintiff was attacked and injured by two gang members armed with razors. After receiving medical treatment, Plaintiff was transferred to the Secured Housing Unit ("SHU"). That month, Plaintiff wrote to DOC staff and requested a transfer. He was informed that he would remain housed in the SHU for his own protection.

In December 2016, a different gang member asked DOC staff to open Plaintiff's cell door, despite the fact that it was not Plaintiff's recreation time. Unnamed staff electronically opened Plaintiff's door, and Plaintiff was attacked by the gang member. Plaintiff alleges the attack was in retaliation because the first two gang members had been charged criminally for the October 2016 incident. As a result of the attack, Plaintiff again asked for a transfer, but his request was denied.

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<sup>1</sup> When bringing a § 1983 claim, a plaintiff must allege that some person has deprived him of a federal right, and that the person who caused the deprivation acted under color of state law. See *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988).

Plaintiff seeks a transfer to another institution and two million dollars in punitive damages. The Court docket reflects that Plaintiff was housed at the VCC when he commenced this action in September 2018, but an October 24, 2018 filing indicates that he was transferred and is now housed at the HRYCI. (See D.I. 6)

### III. LEGAL STANDARDS

A federal court may properly dismiss an action *sua sponte* under the screening provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b) if “the action is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.” *Ball v. Famiglio*, 726 F.3d 448, 452 (3d Cir. 2013); *see also* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) (*in forma pauperis* actions); 28 U.S.C. § 1915A (actions in which prisoner seeks redress from a governmental defendant); 42 U.S.C. § 1997e (prisoner actions brought with respect to prison conditions). The Court must accept all factual allegations in a complaint as true and take them in the light most favorable to a *pro se* plaintiff. *See Phillips v. County of Allegheny*, 515 F.3d 224, 229 (3d Cir. 2008); *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 93 (2007). Because Plaintiff proceeds *pro se*, his pleading is liberally construed and his Complaint, “however inartfully pleaded, must be held to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers.” *Erickson*, 551 U.S. at 94 (citations omitted).

An action is frivolous if it “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989). Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and § 1915A(b)(1), a court may dismiss a complaint as frivolous if it is “based on an indisputably meritless legal theory” or a “clearly baseless” or “fantastic or delusional” factual scenario. *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327-28; *see also Wilson v. Rackmill*, 878 F.2d

772, 774 (3d Cir. 1989); *Deutsch v. United States*, 67 F.3d 1080, 1091-92 (3d Cir. 1995) (holding frivolous a suit alleging that prison officials took an inmate's pen and refused to give it back).

The legal standard for dismissing a complaint for failure to state a claim pursuant to § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and § 1915A(b)(1) is identical to the legal standard used when deciding Rule 12(b)(6) motions. See *Tourscher v. McCullough*, 184 F.3d 236, 240 (3d Cir. 1999) (applying Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6) standard to dismissal for failure to state a claim under § 1915(e)(2)(B)). However, before dismissing a complaint or claims for failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted pursuant to the screening provisions of 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915 and 1915A, the Court must grant a plaintiff leave to amend his complaint unless amendment would be inequitable or futile. See *Grayson v. Mayview State Hosp.*, 293 F.3d 103, 114 (3d Cir. 2002).

A complaint may be dismissed only if, accepting the well-pleaded allegations in the complaint as true and viewing them in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, a court concludes that those allegations “could not raise a claim of entitlement to relief.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 558 (2007). Though “detailed factual allegations” are not required, a complaint must do more than simply provide “labels and conclusions” or “a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action.” *Davis v. Abington Mem’l Hosp.*, 765 F.3d 236, 241 (3d Cir. 2014) (internal quotation marks omitted). In addition, a complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face. See *Williams v. BASF Catalysts LLC*, 765 F.3d 306, 315 (3d Cir. 2014) (citing *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) and *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570). Finally, a plaintiff must plead facts sufficient

to show that a claim has substantive plausibility. See *Johnson v. City of Shelby*, 574 U.S. 10, 10 (2014). A complaint may not be dismissed for imperfect statements of the legal theory supporting the claim asserted. See *id.* at 346.

A court reviewing the sufficiency of a complaint must take three steps: (1) take note of the elements the plaintiff must plead to state a claim; (2) identify allegations that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth; and (3) assume the veracity of any well-pleaded factual allegations and then determine whether those allegations plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief. *Connelly v. Lane Const. Corp.*, 809 F.3d 780, 787 (3d Cir. 2016) (internal citations and quotations omitted). Elements are sufficiently alleged when the facts in the complaint “show” that the plaintiff is entitled to relief. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)). Deciding whether a claim is plausible will be a “context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.” *Id.*

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

##### **A. Transfer**

To the extent Plaintiff seeks transfer to a different correctional institution, the claim fails as a matter of law. First, the issue is moot given that Plaintiff is no longer housed at the VCC. Second, the Delaware Supreme Court has recognized that prison officials have discretion to house inmates at the facilities they choose. *Walls v. Taylor*, 856 A.2d 1067, 2004 WL 906550 (Del. 2004) (table) (citing *Brathwaite v. State*, No. 169, 2003 (Del. Dec. 29, 2003)). Furthermore, the United States Supreme Court has held that an inmate has no due process right to be incarcerated in a particular institution whether it be inside the state of conviction, or outside that state. *Olim v. Wakinekona*,

461 U.S. 238, 251(1983). Finally, “maintaining institutional security and preserving internal order and discipline” are the central goals of prison administration. *Bell v. Wolfish*, 441 U.S. 520, 546 (1979). The Court has no authority to dictate Plaintiff’s housing assignment.

Accordingly, the transfer claim will be dismissed as frivolous pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b)(1).

**B. Personal Involvement/Respondeat Superior**

There are no allegations directed towards any Defendant. Liability in a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action is personal in nature, and to be liable, a defendant must have been personally involved in the wrongful conduct. That is to say, defendants are “liable only for their own unconstitutional conduct.” *Barkes v. First Corr. Med., Inc.*, 766 F.3d 307, 316 (3d Cir. 2014), *rev’d on other grounds sub nom. Taylor v. Barkes*, 135 S.Ct. 2042 (2015). Hence, respondeat superior cannot form the basis of liability. *Evancho v. Fisher*, 423 F.3d 347, 353 (3d Cir. 2005); *see also Alexander v. Forr*, 297 F. App’x 102, 104-05 (3d Cir. 2008) (constitutional deprivation cannot be premised merely on the fact that the defendant was a prison supervisor when the incidents set forth in the complaint occurred). “Because vicarious liability is inapplicable to . . . § 1983 suits, a plaintiff must plead that each Government-official defendant, through the official’s own individual actions, has violated the Constitution.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676.

“[T]here are two theories of supervisory liability, one under which supervisors can be liable if they established and maintained a policy, practice or custom which directly caused the constitutional harm, and another under which they can be liable if they participated in violating plaintiff’s rights, directed others to violate them, or, as the



persons in charge, had knowledge of and acquiesced in their subordinates' violations.” *Parkell v. Danberg*, 833 F.3d 313, 331 (3d Cir. 2016) (quoting *Santiago v. Warminster Twp.*, 629 F.3d 121, 129 n.5 (3d Cir. 2010)).

Even when liberally construing the Complaint, it fails to allege facts that if proven would show personal involvement by any of the named Defendants. Nor are there allegations that the foregoing Defendants personally directed or knew of and acquiesced in any alleged constitutional violation. See *Evancho v. Fisher*, 423 F.3d at 353-54. Absent any allegation of personal involvement, Plaintiff's § 1983 claims against Defendants cannot stand. There are no claims against Defendants. Therefore, Defendants will be dismissed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b)(1).

### **C. Failure to Protect**

To the extent it is his intent, the Complaint does not state a claim for failure to protect. To prevail on an Eighth Amendment failure to protect claim, a plaintiff is required to show that (1) he is incarcerated under conditions posing a substantial risk of serious harm (the objective element); and (2) prison officials acted with deliberate indifference, *i.e.*, that prison officials knew of and disregarded an excessive risk to inmate health or safety (the subjective element). See *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 833-34 (1994); see also *Griffin v. DeRosa*, 153 F. App'x 851 (3d Cir. 2005).

To establish deliberate indifference, a plaintiff must show that the individual was subjectively aware of the risk of harm to the plaintiff's health or safety, and disregarded it. See *Natale v. Camden Cty. Corr. Facility*, 318 F.3d 575, 582 (3d Cir. 2003). “The knowledge element of deliberate indifference is subjective, not objective knowledge, meaning that the official must actually be aware of the existence of the excessive risk; it

is not sufficient that the official should have been aware.” *Beers-Capitol v. Whetzel*, 256 F.3d 120, 133 (3d Cir. 2001). Knowledge may be shown where the official has actual notice of the risk, *Nami v. Fauver*, 82 F.3d 63, 67-68 (3d Cir. 1996), or where the risk was “longstanding, pervasive, well-documented, or expressly noted by prison officials in the past, and the circumstances suggest that the defendant-official being sued had been exposed to information concerning the risk and thus must have known about it.” *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 842.

Here, the Complaint does not allege that any Defendant knew that gang members would assault Plaintiff and ignored that risk. Nor does it name any Defendant who might have been aware of any risk. Therefore, the allegations fail to state a cognizable Eighth Amendment failure-to-protect claim and the Court will dismiss the Complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and 1915A(b)(1). Since it is plausible that Plaintiff may be able to state a claim against Defendants or name alternative defendants, he will be given leave to amend the failure to protect claim.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

For the above reasons, the Court will: (1) dismiss the Complaint as frivolous and for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted pursuant 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and (ii) and 1915A(b)(1). Plaintiff will be given leave to amend the failure to protect claim. All other claims will be dismissed.

An appropriate order will be entered.